

# Black Theatre: A Cultural Comparison

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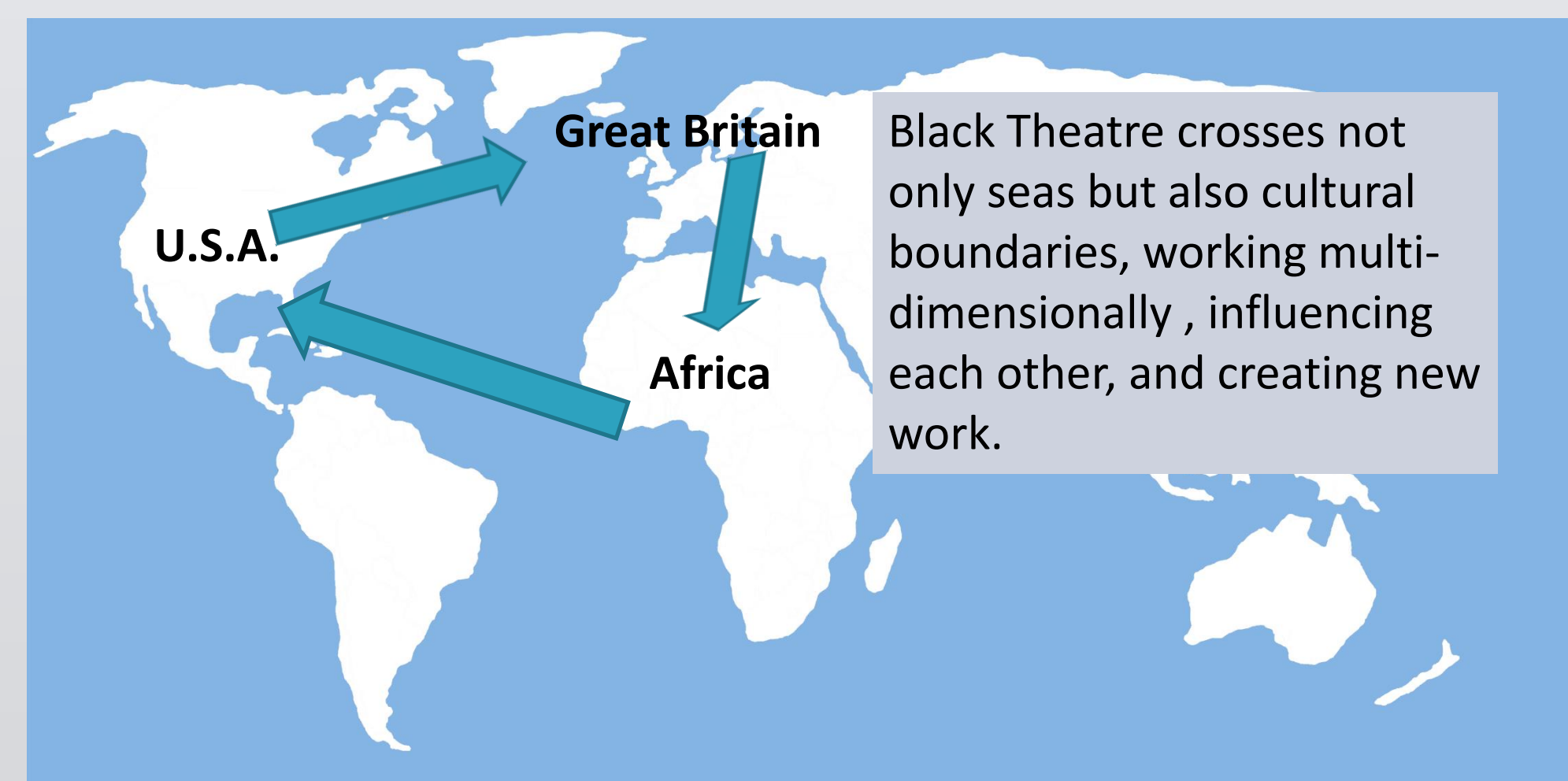
Faculty Advisors: Dr. Joy Reilly, Pro. Kristin Kearney, and Pro. Jen Schlueter

### Introduction

Over the course of my undergraduate experience at The Ohio State University, I have become increasingly interested in investigating the depth of the relationships found within Black Theatre art forms. My studies as a Theatre major, as well as, my extracurricular activities have exposed me to many contrasting viewpoints and approaches to Black artistic endeavors. It is my belief that the relationship of African American culture and Black British culture is a complex mix of style, tradition, and customs. Throughout the decades there has been a dance of close cultural exchange with a distinct separate evolution wherein the two cultures separate only to join again and exchange their newly developed ideas.

I have examined the ways that Black British Theatre and African American Theatre are similar and different. I have identified the major differences between the two, by looking at the origins of both cultures.

Research Claim: My claim is that the differences realized in Black British Theatre and African American Theatre are due to the alternate cultural histories in England and America.



### Objective

It is my objective to bring to light the influences that African American Theatre has had on the other side of the sea. African American performing arts have inspired more than black arts in the United States but also abroad. The Civil Rights Movement in America sparked social change in Britain just as the Black Arts Movement sparked a change in the Black British Arts scene.

### Methods

To support my claim I look for evidence in several locations and through varying forms of research.

- I participated in the Dept. of Theatre's London Study Abroad Trip 2013
- I conducted research at the National Theatre Archives, The Bodleian Library and attended live performances of both African American and Black British plays in both America and England.
- I spent time reading through several plays doing play-text analysis of black plays in both cultures while examining historical events for reference of social and cultural overlap.
- I have evaluated the way culture works through the six primary characteristics of culture:

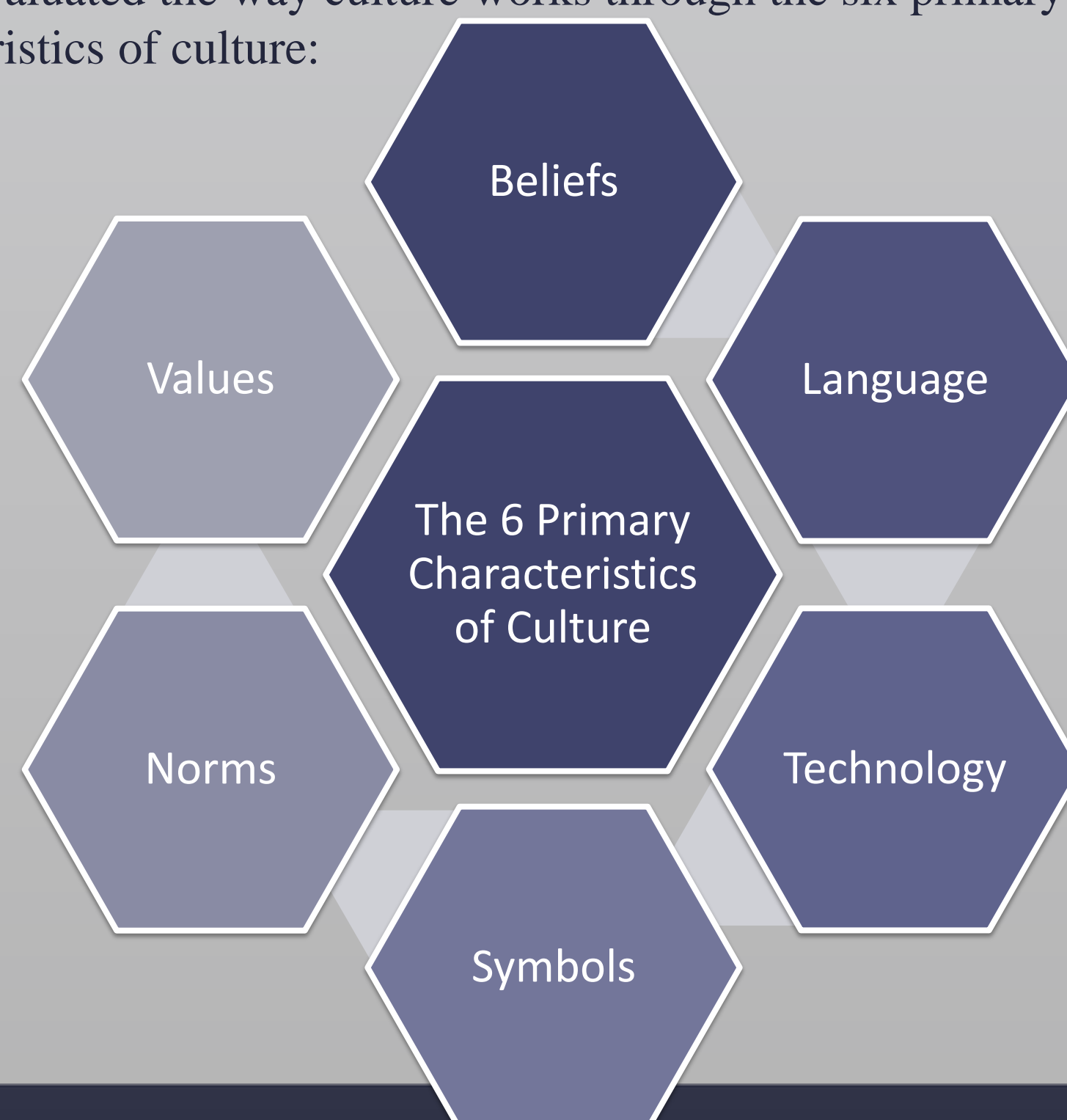


Photo 1 & 2: 'Crumbs From The Table of Joy' performed at the Weathervane Playhouse Winter 2011

This was the first Black play that I performed and had a lead role in. It explored the family relationships in the midst of social injustices and cultural hardships

### Findings

African American Theatre: Black Culture has had a great impact on American Theatre. Black Arts have a very distinctive look and sound that flooded the American stage creating a unique style of theatre never seen before.

1920-30's-The Harlem Renaissance:



Zora Neale Hurston was the forerunner of many black playwrights, specifically female African American playwrights. Without her work artists such as Lorraine Hansberry would never have had their chance to expose the world to the Black experience through theatrical performance.

1950's- Civil Rights Movement:  
James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry



Both found ways to write about the Black experience and struggle in the present.

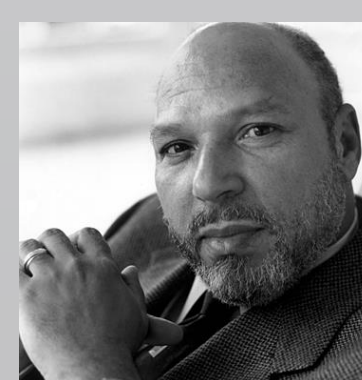
1970's-Black Arts Movement:  
Ntozake Shange



Shange wrote "For Colored Girls" in 'choreo-poem' the style of African arts.

1980's-Change in Black Arts:  
August Wilson and George C. Wolfe

Wilson wrote a series of plays that followed the stories of African Americans through several the decades.



Wolfe wrote "The Colored Museum" a show that created a satire of black stereotypes.



1990's-The End of A Century:

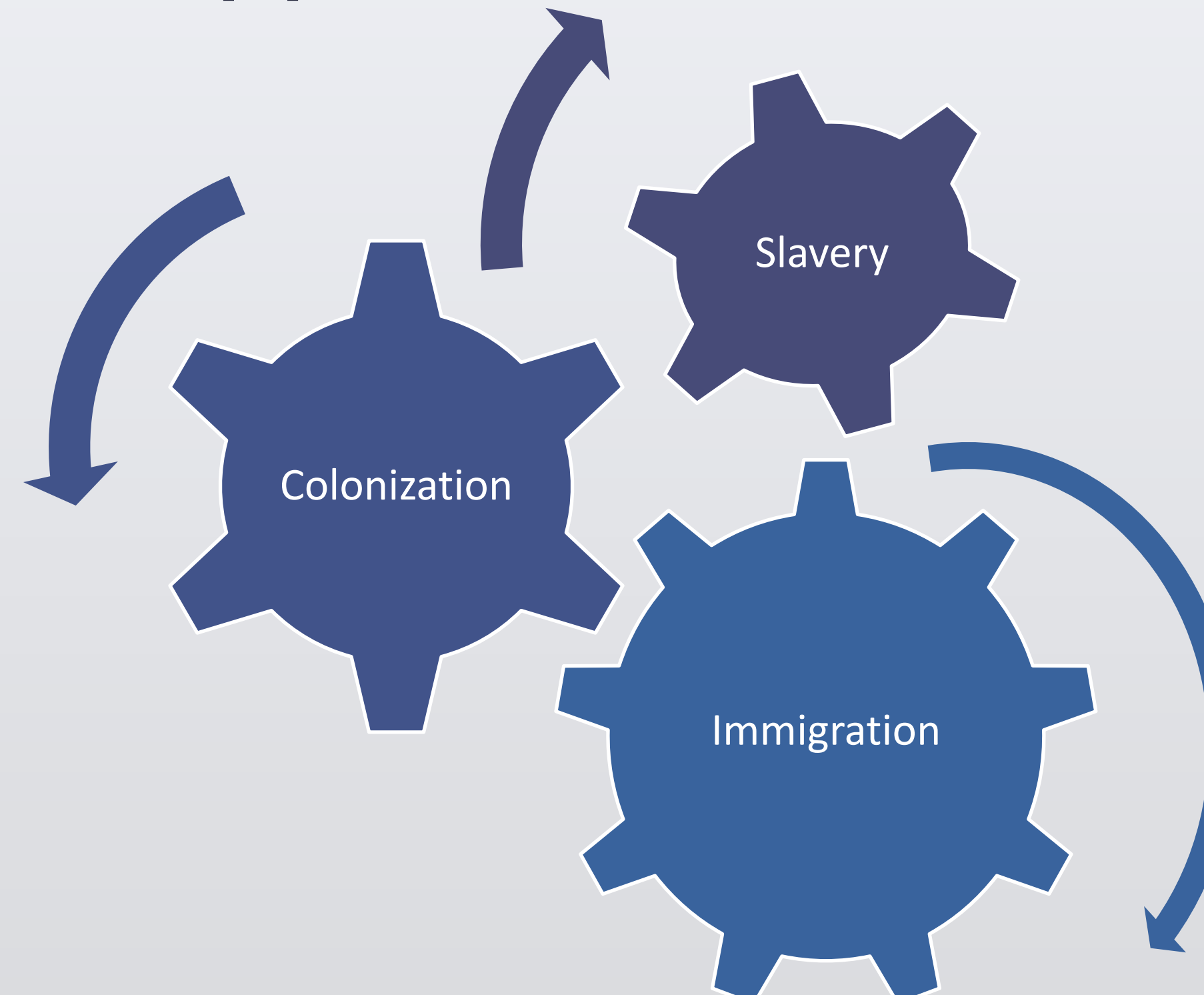
Lynn Nottage wrote plays having to do with the shared Black past.



Black British Theatre:

Has been greatly influenced by African American Theatre in the 1950's and 60's much of the Civil Rights Movement inspired similar Civil Rights action in Britain against social injustice. African American plays of this topic also flooded British stages.

African Influence on Black British Theatre today is substantially more significant than that in the American Black arts arena. To understand modern black culture in the UK one must grasp the relationship between Britain and Africa historically. This would be the three great sins that England has committed against Africa since its first encounters with African peoples as a whole.



- Slavery –even though England abolished slavery before the U.S. it still perpetuated slavery much longer in respect to total years as compared to the U.S. The English were enslaving people long before the United States was even established as a country.
- Colonization- Britain maintained colonies in Africa well into the 20th century. Colonialism is the economic, political and social control of a nation over a dependent country, territory or people. It also refers to the governing influence of one nation over a dependent people -influences that may, to a greater or lesser degree, impact the dependent population's religion, language and culture. "Just like slavery, colonization was an economic act, but other reasons were put forward to explain and justify it, to both the colonized and the colonizer. Europe's obdurate image of Africa had been formed accounts of travelers and the slave traders themselves, and this image was reinforced effectively and became entrenched during the colonial era" (Okagbue, 2009).
- Immigration – Or rather the mistreatment of African immigrants post WWII. This entailed segregation, discrimination, and Blacks still had little to no say or even rights in British society. The biggest issue was identity. Second generation Black British children sought to distance themselves from their parent's African identities and simply be recognized as British.



Photo: Perserevance Dr. performed at the Bush Theatre Summer 2014

This play deals greatly with identity in a family who struggles with nationality, religion and cultural identity.

### Conclusion

In conclusion the differences in Black Theater shouldn't be ignored in favor of viewing the similarities. The relationship of African American culture and Black British culture is a dance of a close cultural exchange with a distinct separate evolution in which the two cultures separate only to join again and exchange their newly developed ideas. This exchange has been seen greatly in recent years. African American Theatre has influenced and been influenced by Black British Theatre greatly. African American Theatre and Black British Theatre have many things in common but are unique because of their differences. These differences are demonstrated and directly reflected in the plays and theatre produced by each culture and the subsequent interpretation of their work. Black Theatre as a whole is as diverse as European theatre if not more so due to the lack of the continental boundaries that restrict European theatre.

### Future Work

There is plenty of room for future work in this area of study. There are countless plays that can be read and compared as well as analyzed for further findings. On the cultural study side, there is plenty of room to research cultural similarities between the way blacks are treated in England as compared to America; using statistical data.

Interviews with black playwrights, directors and actors would greatly benefit this cultural arts study.

I, my-self plan to work on a Distinction paper to further record my findings.

It is my greatest hope that Black British Theatre will one day be taught in theatre arts class rooms along side African American Theatre classes.

### References

Available upon request



Photo: 'The Amen Corner' performed at the National Theater Summer 2013

### Acknowledgements and Contact Info

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